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ABSTRACT

To measure how Puerto Ricans classify each other into racial groups by physical appearance, a stimulus set of 60 color slides was prepared. Two hundred and fifty secondary students sorted these portraits into four, three, and finally two groups. Although subjects placed both the pictures and themselves in a color continuum of racial types with extraordinary consistency, and without bias due to their own colors, no consistent "black-white" dividing line appeared. An expected tendency to make finer discriminations among persons of approximately one's own color was not found; instead, subjects appeared to group together a broad range of intermediate characteristics. (Author)

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Measuring Puerto Ricans' Perceptions of Racial Characteristics

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Abstract

To measure how Puerto Ricans classify each other into racial groups by physical appearance, a stimulus set of 60 color slides was prepared. Two hundred and fifty secondary students sorted these portraits into four, three, and finally two groups. Although subjects placed both the pictures and themselves in a color continuum of racial types with extraordinary consistency, and without bias due to their own colors, no consistent "black-white" dividing line appeared. An expected tendency to make finer discriminations among persons of approximately one's own color was not found; instead, subjects appeared to group together a broad range of intermediate characteristics.

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Measuring Puerto Ricans' Perceptions of Racial Characteristics

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Introduction

We wished to study how Puerto Ricans assign one another to various racial classifications, how that assignment is influenced by the eyes of the beholder, and what perceptual cues affect it. An immediate obstacle to doing any of those things was the absence of a scale by which the response of racial classification could be measured.

Rogler (1940) asked Puerto Rican subjects whom he had himself divided into "white" and "mulatto" groups to say to what race various passers-by belonged. Thieme (1959) sought to describe the relative importance of various physical characteristics in racial assignment. Rogler (1940), Blanco (1942), and Gordon (1950) have remarked that income and other indicators of social class can substantially alter the way a person's race is described. Secord, Bevan, and Katz (1956) asked subjects to sort prints of year-book photographs into piles. Sereno (1947) coined the term "cryptomelanism" to refer to the denial of Negroid characteristics among the upper classes of Puerto Rico.

In order to permit more systematic studies of the way Puerto Ricans perceive racial characteristics, we undertook to produce a set

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of reference pictures of varying racial types, together with a procedure for measuring response to them.

Materials and Procedure

We found that projection trasparencies offered better resolution and range of color than any prints we could obtain, as well as the possibility of group administration. We prepared 108 slides showing both full-face and profile views of student volunteers from the University of Puerto Rico. We rated each slide by four criteria proposed by Thieme, masking the slides so that as far as possible other attributes were concealed while each was rated. Slides were sorted by referring to a reference set separated by one just noticeable difference in skin color, hair texture, nose width, and fullness of mouth. A subset of 60 slides was chosen as a stratified sample spanning the range of types encountered. These ranged in appearance from Northern European to West African, with the greatest number suggesting Mediterranean with various admixtures of African types.

The sixty slides were shown four times, always in the same order, with 5 seconds exposure for each. Each subject had a score sheet with a numbered row for each slide, and on each row two, three, or four unlabelled boxes. After an initial showing to familiarize them with all pictures, Ss were asked into which of four racial groups each slide should be put. The categories were not named, but Ss were told that the boxes at the left meant "más blanco" (more white) and those at the right "más negro" (more black). The procedure was repeated with three boxes and then two boxes. Each S was also asked to

describe himself on the same scales.

A composite score was formed by dividing a 12-point scale into equal halves, thirds, or quarters. The possible combined scores ranged from -23 (whitest) to 23 (most Negro).

The subjects were 250 seniors from two public high schools in the San Juan area. After eliminating Ss whose responses were grossly defective or incomplete, 201 remained. The first experimenter and two assistant judges rated the slides on the same scale as the Ss, and recorded their ratings. While the Ss were receiving instructions and filling out additional questionnaires, the judges unobtrusively rated the Ss on the same three scales.

Internal Consistency and Anomalous Responses

The variance of the composite scores of 201 Ss each rating 60 slides was divided into a subjects component, a slides component, and an interaction term (McNemar, 1962, p. 147). The consistency with which Ss differentiate the slides calculated as

$$\frac{\text{slide variance - interaction variance}}{\text{slide variance}}$$

was .99. The composite ratings of the three judges correlated .97 with the average rating of the 201 Ss on the 60 slides.

Each S made three ratings of each slide and of himself. Certain combinations of responses were considered anomalous; for instance, a slide judged at the extreme of a four-point scale should also be at the extreme on a shorter scale, but occasionally on a later rating Ss reversed what they had reported at first. Such reversals occured

in 3.9% of the responses, presumably in response to slides about which Ss felt uncertain. Figure 1 shows the frequency of reversals plotted against the judges' rating of each slide. Reversals were most frequent for slides depicting medium-light complexions.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Dark-to-light reversals were more than 3 times as frequent as light-to-dark reversals; $X = 406$, $df = 5$, $p < .01$. Perhaps the asymmetry of these second thoughts is an instance of cryptomelanism.

Subjects' Self-Reports

What the Ss said about themselves agreed closely with what the judges said about them; the correlation between the composite self-description and the average of the judges' ratings was .82.

How does one's own color influence one's judgement of others? If S makes finer distinctions regarding gradations of color near his own, the graph of his description of the slides versus a reference description will have slope greater than 1, because small changes in the "objective" description will be accompanied by more rapid change in S's evaluation. Following Helson (1964) and others, we expected S to assimilate persons near himself to his own position, but beyond some threshhold to see everyone as members of the other camp, so that a curve plotting Ss' versus judges' descriptions of the slides would have steep slope for slides near S's own color, but little slope elsewhere.

Ss were divided into quartiles by color, and a third-degree

polynomial fitted for each group (Figure 2). These curves showed little if any separation; contrary to our expectation, all four showed little slope through the mid-section but steep slope at the extremes.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The Line Between "Black" and "White"

Societies with a long history of racial segregation, such as the mainland United States, often treat race as a dichotomous variable. Moving in order through a sequence of slides such as ours, one would expect an abrupt transition from those which almost all Ss agree are "white" to those which almost all agree are "black." By contrast, our Puerto Rican subjects showed a steadily increasing tendency to rate a slide as "black," but no agreement about where the boundary between "black" and "white" should be drawn. For 15 of the 60 slides, subjects split 33%-66% or even more evenly on whether the person shown should be called "black" or "white." Ss who were themselves nearer the black end of the scale showed a slightly increased tendency to call others "black." Ss in the two intermediate quartiles by color were slightly inclined to use the label "white" more frequently than were subjects in either of the extreme quartiles (Figure 3).

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Perhaps this effect, small as it is, is another instance of cryptomelanism.

Relative Weight of Physical Features in Subjects' Response

Taking the initial ratings of skin color, hair texture, width of nose, and fullness of mouth, we calculated a multiple correlation for prediction of the average score the Ss gave each slide. A multiple correlation of .93 was found, with beta weights as follows: skin color, .628; hair texture, .327; mouth, .157; sex, .117; nose width, .016. The first four are significant beyond the .01 level. The first two agree with the relative values informally described by Thieme.

Conclusions

A set of slides was developed permitting group administration of a fairly open-ended measure of racial classification. Subjects evaluated these pictures with an extraordinary consistency, and also reported self-descriptions that were in close agreement with those reported by judges. We found little tendency for a S's own color to alter his perception of others; nor did Ss make finer distinctions among slides whose color was near their own.

Our procedure could be used to study the effects of cultural context on racial perceptions. Detailed anthropometric measurements of features of the slides would permit one to state more precisely which physical features are cues to racial classification.

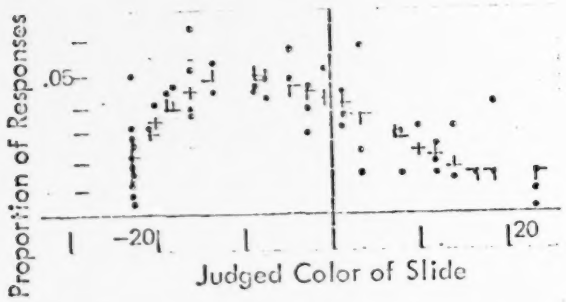

Figure 1. Proportion of responses involving reversal of subject's earlier response to the same slide, by judges' rating of the color of the slide.

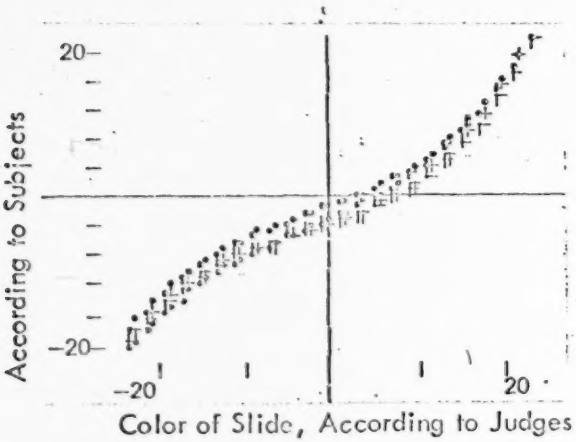

Figure 2. Smoothed curves representing subjects' description of color of slides as function of judges' ratings. Upper dots, for subjects in darkest quartile. Lower dots, subjects in lightest quartile. Crosses, subjects in two mid-quartiles.

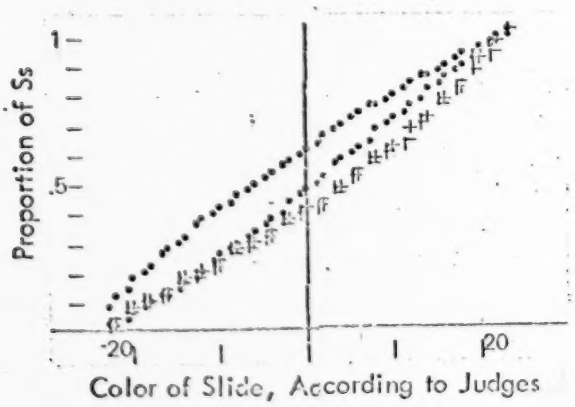

Figure 3. Proportion of subjects saying slide is "black" during two-choice sort, by judges' rating of color of slide. Upper dots: Darkest quartile of subjects. Lower dots, lightest quartile. Crosses, two mid-quartiles.

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